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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4513  
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN  
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
AMEMBASSY CAIRO  
AMEMBASSY RIYADH  
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV  
AMEMBASSY TUNIS  
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SUBJECT: ASAD GRANTS AMNESTY FOR 540 POLITICAL PRISONERS

¶1. SYRIAN PRESIDENT ASAD HAS ISSUED A DECREE GRANTING AN AMNESTY TO 540 PRISONERS HELD ON "SECURITY" GROUNDS, ACCORDING TO THE MAIN NEWS BULLETIN ON GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED DAMASCUS RADIO AT 1415 LOCAL TIME, DECEMBER ¶1. THE BRIEF BULLETIN DID NOT ELABORATE ON THE IDENTITIES OF THE PRISONERS, THE NATURE OF THEIR OFFENSES, OR THE OCCASION FOR THE PRESIDENT'S DECISION.

¶2. IN A RELATED MATTER, WE NOTE FROM THE NOVEMBER 27 EDITION OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE LEBANESE NEWSPAPER "L'ORIENT-LE JOUR" THAT SYRIAN EX-PRESIDENT NUR AL-DIN AL-ATASI (WHO WAS PRESIDENT WHEN ASAD SEIZED POWER IN 1970) REPORTEDLY ARRIVED IN PARIS BY PRIVATE PLANE FROM DAMASCUS A FEW DAYS EARLIER TO BEGIN TREATMENT AT THE AMERICAN HOSPITAL IN NEUILLY OF CANCER OF THE ESOPHAGUS. AL-ATASI WAS FREED ON MEDICAL GROUNDS IN LATE AUGUST. UNTIL RECENTLY A SYRIAN HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP BASED IN PARIS ALLEGED THAT THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT WAS HINDERING AL-ATASI'S FAMILY'S EFFORTS TO TRANSPORT HIM TO PARIS (A CHARGE DENIED AT THE TIME BY AN MFA OFFICIAL).

¶3. COMMENT: AMONG THE POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THIS LATEST RELEASE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS IS THE 22ND ANNIVERSARY OF THE "CORRECTIONIST MOVEMENT" COUP THAT BROUGHT ASAD TO POWER. ALTHOUGH THAT ANNIVERSARY ACTUALLY FELL ON NOVEMBER 16, A LAG OF TWO WEEKS WOULD FOLLOW THE PATTERN OF PREVIOUS RELEASES (THE LATE MARCH RELEASE WAS ANNOUNCED TWO WEEKS AFTER ASAD'S SWEARING-IN TO A FOURTH TERM IN OFFICE, WHILE LAST DECEMBER'S AMNESTY WAS PUBLICIZED TWO WEEKS AFTER THE PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM). IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE THAT THESE RELEASES ARE RELATED TO SESSIONS OF THE STATE SECURITY COURT THAT HAVE BEEN UNDERWAY FOR SOME TIME TO DETERMINE THE SENTENCES FOR POLITICAL DETAINEES WHO HAD NOT PREVIOUSLY BEEN BROUGHT TO TRIAL.

¶4. COMMENT CONTINUED: THIS LATEST AMNESTY FOLLOWS THE APPEARANCE IN THE NOVEMBER 29 EDITION OF THE OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER "AL-BA'TH" OF AN EDITORIAL WRITTEN BY VICE PRESIDENT MASHARQA CHIDING WESTERN GOVERNMENTS FOR THEIR CRITICISMS OF SYRIA'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD. MASHARQA ACCUSED THESE GOVERNMENTS OF APPLYING DOUBLE STANDARDS IN JUDGING THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATIONS IN OTHER COUNTRIES WHILE IGNORING PROBLEMS (LIKE RACIAL DISCRIMINATION) IN THEIR OWN COUNTRIES OR IN "RACIST COUNTRIES, ESPECIALLY ISRAEL AND SOUTH AFRICA." AS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS, MASHARQA COMPLAINED THAT THESE GROUPS FAIL TO PAY ATTENTION TO "ISRAELI CRIMES." HE CONCLUDED THAT "THE MOTIVE BEHIND THE STANDS OF MOST

WESTERN STATES AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONS ON THE ISSUE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IS TO PUT PRESSURE ON COUNTRIES WHOSE POLICIES ARE GOVERNED BY NATIONAL OR PAN-ARAB INTERESTS WHICH ARE NOT HARMONIOUS WITH THEIR PURPOSES AND INTERESTS." WHILE THE DECISION TO LET AL-ATASI GO TO PARIS APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN MADE QUIETLY TO SATISFY EXTERNAL CRITICS, ASAD IS TRYING NOT TO LOOK LIKE HE YIELDED TO INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE WITH RESPECT TO THE AMNESTY. MASHARQA'S TOUGH PUBLIC STANCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS BEFORE THESE RELEASES ECHOES THE ONE ASAD USED IN HIS MARCH 14 INAUGURATION SPEECH, WHICH CAME TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF A SIMILAR AMNESTY.

ROSS